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COMMENTS ON THE NOAA-EVOS 20TH ANNIVERSARY EVENT  
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AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

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Thank you. We are here to remember an event that happened almost 20 years ago. At 12:04 a.m. on March 24, 1989, the Exxon Valdez, carrying over 53 million gallons of crude oil, failed to turn back into the shipping lane after detouring to avoid ice, and ran aground on Bligh Reef. Alaskans will never forget that morning, waking up to hear about the worst oil spill in U.S. history and living with the lasting impacts it has had on our State and residents.

The National Transportation Safety Board investigated the accident and determined probable causes for the accident. While it determined that it was primarily caused by human error of the captain and crew, it is my belief that we had also become complacent. It had been 12 years since we had begun to tanker oil out of Valdez and there had not been an incident. However, when the spill occurred, we became acutely aware of how woefully unprepared we were. The few prevention measures that were available were inadequate and the spill response and clean-up resources were seriously deficient. The oil eventually fouled some 1,300 miles of shoreline, stretching almost 500 miles, and covered an area of 11,000 square miles. The clean-up eventually employed over 11,000 people and continued, to some degree, for the next three summers.

It is difficult to access the environmental damage caused by the spill. The loss of seabirds, marine mammals, and fish are difficult to quantify, but the impacts of the spill have been studied and researched extensively. One of the surprising results of the long term monitoring is that after 20 years, there still remains persistent oil. And some of the areas and species impacted are still recovering today. Money from the Exxon Valdez oil spill settlement funded a restoration Plan, which consists of monitoring, research, habitat protection and public information. This effort has resulted in significant gains in scientific knowledge about the marine environment, impacted species, and ecosystem research.

Oil spill prevention and response have been greatly improved since 1989. The U.S. Coast Guard now monitors fully laden tankers all the way through Prince William Sound. Specially trained marine pilots ride the ships for 25 of the 70 mile journey through the Sound and there is weather criteria for safe navigation. Contingency plans, skimmers, dispersants, oil barges and containment booms are all now readily available. An advanced ice-detecting radar system is also in place to monitor the ice bergs that flow off of the mighty Columbia Glacier.

Two escort tugs accompany each tanker while passing through the Sound and are capable of assisting the tanker in the case of an emergency. This world class safety system recently saw the 11,000th fully loaded tanker safely escorted through Prince William Sound. Congress also enacted legislation requiring all tankers in Prince William Sound to be double-hulled by the year 2015. It is estimated that if the Exxon Valdez would have been double-hulled, the amount of the spill would have been reduced by more than half.

While we have made significant progress in spill prevention and response, increased our scientific knowledge of oils spills, clean up and environmental monitoring, we can't allow ourselves to get complacent again. The Exxon Valdez oil spill had severe negative impacts, both culturally and economically, on the people who live in Prince William Sound and the areas affected by the spill. Twenty years later, the spill and the effects of the ongoing litigation continue to affect the individuals, communities and villages impacted. The 32,000 victims of the spill thought they would get closure when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on the issue of punitive damages, but instead, the Court reduced the damages by 80% and remanded the question of interest back to a lower court. Other impacts include Subsistence gathering that has not resumed in many areas and commercial fisheries that remain disrupted. Many of the marine species and mammals have not recovered to their previous population levels.

It is unfortunate that it takes an environmental disaster of this magnitude to enact the kind of preventative measures and responses necessary to keep it from happening again. We must remain ever vigilant to insure that we are doing everything possible to prevent this from ever happening again. As the philosopher Georges Santayana said, "Those who forget the past, are condemned to repeat it."

Thank you.